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FATHERING A CHESS PRODIGY

By Fred Waitzkin

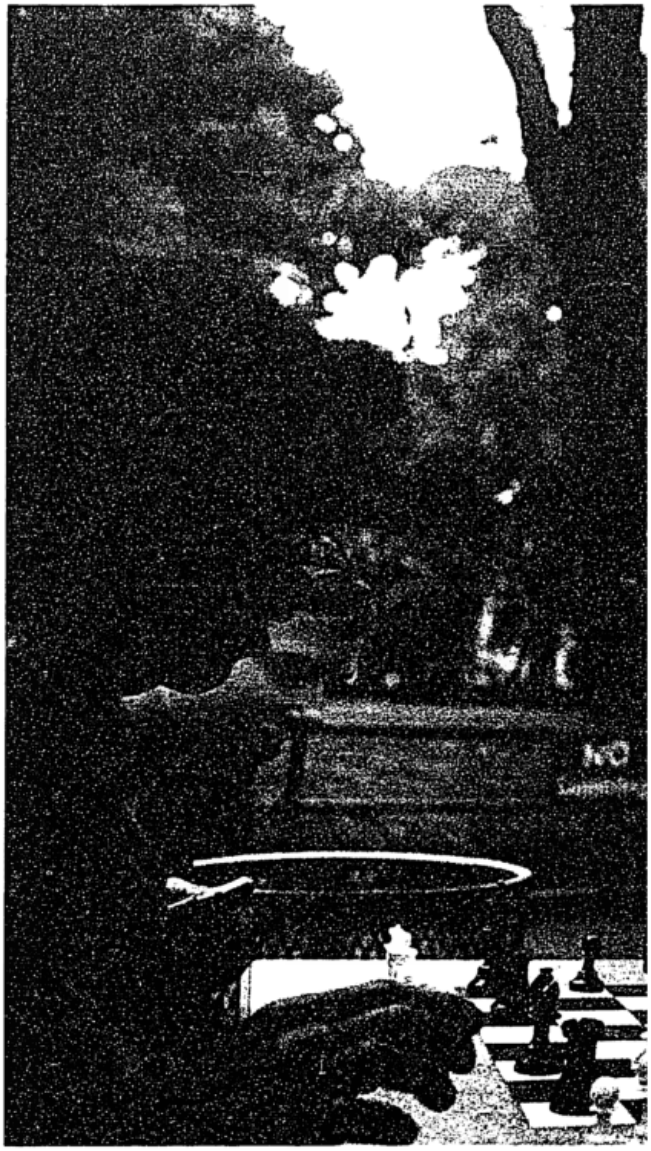
IN THE SPRING OF 1984, AT THE NATIONAL ELEmentary Chess Championship in Syracuse, N.Y., a distraught father began to whisper moves to his son. Across the gymnasium floor, scores of other parents crowded close to the chessboards and nervously discussed the games within earshot of the players. Some of the 6-, 7- and 8-year-old children asked the parents to be quiet and to give them room to play. Two frustrated fathers began shoving each other, and one took a swing. Eventually, the irate tournament director ordered all parents out of the playing room. More than 100 fathers and mothers paced in the hall. The absence of desperate parents was a relief to the kids, no doubt, but being locked out heightened the already feverish anxiety of these poor people. Every once in a while, the tournament director would open a two-inch crack in the door so the children would have some ventilation. Instantly, scores of parents would scramble for a hand-in-your-face glimpse of their kid's game. I was among them.

When Josh was a baby, I fantasized that he would grow up to be a star basketball player. I would cheer from the stands. Together we would stay in shape jogging like Joe and his father in Ernest Hemingway's story "My Old Man." But my son is a chess player instead. He is currently the highest rated third-grader in the United States. Our home has become cluttered with gaudy trophies, chess sets, chess clocks, score books, computers and chess literature in different languages. His precocious talent for this board game has seized control of my imagination.

I used to worry about my career, my health, my marriage, my friends, my mother. Now, I mostly worry about his chess. I worry about his rating and if he's done his chess homework. There are tournaments to be concerned about. Has he practiced enough? Too much? In years past, while I sat at my desk struggling to write, I often fantasized about the Knicks or about going fishing. Now, in my mind, I play over his chess games. I am a passionate sportsman, and I find it remarkable that Josh's sedentary activity has displaced so many priorities in my life.

Josh also loves sports, and at chess tournaments he is eager to play ball between rounds. While I gather *(Continued on Page 56)*

Fred Waitzkin is a New York writer who is working on a book about the chess world for Random House.



The author, holding his daughter, Katya, monitors an informal match pitting his son, Josh, against opponents in Washington Square.

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It's an odd position for a father to be the caddie and coach for his 3½-foot, third-grade son.

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up his chess pieces and pencils, it's my job to say, "No, Josh. You don't want to knock yourself out. Why not go over your openings?" Usually, he is seated at the No. 1 board, and other little kids sometimes get sick to their stomachs because they have to play against my little kid. Their parents treat me deferentially, as if I'd done something myself. It's an odd position for a father to be the caddie and coach for his 3½-foot, sitting, brooding son.

At home, Josh takes a lesson from his teacher Bruce Pandolfini and assumes "the position — two hands under his chin and staring bullets at the chessboard."

JOSH AND I PLAYED OUR FIRST chess game on a squat coffee table in the living room. Josh sat on the oriental rug, his face cupped in his hands, his eyes at the level of the wooden pieces as if he were peering into a dangerous but alluring forest. By trial and error, more than by my instruction, which he staunchly resisted, Josh figured out tricky ways to trap my pieces. On his own, he discovered standard chess strategies and tactics that players have used for centuries. He was good at this new game.

So good, I kept forgetting that he was 6. Many evenings I became caught up in the intrigues of combat and found myself trying to take my son's head off. I batted aside his little attacks like Rommel — I crushed him. Josh would come back, shaking his fist at me and making twisted grimaces. "I must win, I must win," he'd repeat to himself.

It must have been profoundly confusing for him that I was able to defeat his best ideas. A couple of times, I offered him the handicap of knight odds and Josh cried at my impudence, as if I'd tried to humiliate him. Already he seemed to know that his old man was a hack, what chess players call "a patzer."

While I tried to slaughter him, I rooted for him to win. The game became a quicksand of passion for us. After an emotional loss, Josh would pretend not to care, but his bottom lip would tremble. Dejected, he'd go off to his room and my heart would be broken. My carefully crafted victories felt like defeats. The next day Josh would refuse to play me again, not even for a new toy car, not even for candy. I would feel panicky. Maybe during my last blistering attack, I'd killed off his baby dream of being the world champion. Or maybe it was my dream, not his. Such distinctions are ambiguous between a father and a little son. This is how fathers mess up their kids, I'd think. Would you throw a slider to a 6-year-old just learning to hit? Or smack him in the belly with a hard spiral? But a few days later, we would be at it again.

Once, after I'd sprung a trap on his queen, he announced that he didn't want to become a grandmaster. "It's too hard," he said. Feeling badly, I asked what he would do instead. He pronounced soberly that he would work in a pizza shop that had a Pac-Man machine. He knew how much I hate video games. I suppose, in retrospect, that Josh was just beginning to exercise his muscle as a chess psychologist, trying to soften me up, because the following afternoon he was squirming with pluck and purpose, knocking down pieces each time he reached his short arm across the board to take one of my pawns. That day I was feeling like the Russian Anatoly Karpov, the current world champion, carefully building an insurmountable attack. The game took a long time. While he was considering the position, I took a break for a shower. I was toweling off when Josh called me, beside himself with impatience. I grabbed a beer, checked the position and made my move. Josh smiled, slid his rook over, and announced, "Mate in two."

"I doubt it," I said smugly, but every move was a vise. He had me. I hugged him and we rolled on the floor laughing. That was the first time he ever beat me.

When Josh was 7, he was clearly the stronger player. His United States Chess Federation rating was higher than that of half the tournament players in the country. Sometimes my friends would watch while he took me apart. They'd shake their heads and I'd beam with parental pride. But later that night, I'd be studying chess books for a new opening to use against him. Excited as I was by his burgeoning and inexplicable chess talent, I found it unsettling that he could calculate exchanges more accurately and three times faster than I could. He beat me game after game. Losing to him made me feel old and dull. The first time Josh offered *me* knight odds, I became furious, as if he'd been egregiously disrespectful. There were times when he was so blithely trapping my pieces that I'd want to wrestle him to the ground and pin his arms.

Long before he turned 8, Josh knew that he was in a different class than his old man and he stopped trying. While I carefully appraised the possibilities for each piece, he thumbed through books, looked out the window, chewed gum, chatted with his mother, cracked jokes, tapped his foot, sighed. Usually when he played in this indifferent manner he lost. I took his neglected knights and bishops. He yawned when I snatched his unprotected queen. So what. Big deal. It made me furious. With a chess player's reason and guile he pointed out that he was *(Continued on Page 60)*

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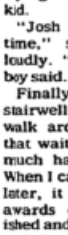

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CHESS PRODIGY

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allowed to lose to me: he was only 7. Sometimes, after he'd lost a piece in a careless manner, I'd get impatient with him and sweep the chessmen from the board. I truly yearned to be beaten, but Josh would have no part of it.

Once, after a particularly frustrating encounter, my wife, who frequently reminded us that there is life after chess, said: "Don't you know, he really doesn't want to beat his daddy." This remark stopped me in my tracks. In the heat of our competitions, it had never occurred to me that Josh might feel uncomfortable snuffing out his old man like an ant.

THESE DAYS, JOSH and I rarely play chess. Instead, I watch his chess lessons, or take him to play stronger opponents in Washington Square Park or to his tournaments. In my new role as chess coach and fan, I've come to have compassion, if not begrudging respect, for John McEnroe's father and for other fathers and mothers like us — a beleaguered fraternity of watchers and worriers who have been unexpectedly sucked into a world in which we are not expert nor even proficient.

Outside chess circles, my involvement with Joshua's chess is often perceived as a kind of quirky self-indulgence. I watch the parents of Joshua's friends make harsh, silent judgments when I try to explain that he is living a well-rounded life, but that there is just no time for Little League: "What's he doing with that boy? Chess? He should be taking piano and tennis lessons, playing stickball, going to Yankee games. And what about his religious education? You mean you're keeping him out of Hebrew school because of tournaments?"

Such disapproving messages confuse me, make me feel guilty. Maybe Joshua doesn't really love chess, I worry. Maybe I'm forcing it on him. When I ask him if he really loves chess he says "yeah" and shrugs in a way that suggests he likes video games more. Then I have to wonder if you can really trust what an 8-year-old says he likes. I'm the parent, I must decide what's best for him. But what is best? Many afternoons, Josh sits at the chessboard shielding his ears to the siren song of little boys riding their bikes on the sidewalk below our window. When I was 7, I would have cried if my father had made such a demand. But my father didn't make a little John McEnroe.

Joshua's chess teacher, Bruce Pandolfini, arrives at our apartment at 6:30 in the morning and Josh stumbles out of bed in pj's, wearing the same dreamy face as my 4-month-old daughter. But within a few seconds, he has assumed the position — two hands under his chin and staring bullets at the chessboard. My little Karpov. Watching him sit at the board, concentrating like a miniature master, has become more exciting to me than watching Julius Erving (Joshua's nickname has always been "Dr. J") whirl 360 degrees and jam. But maybe Josh will hate me when he grows up. He will spend years talking to a psychiatrist about the trip I laid on him at 7 when he stopped concentrating during a speed game with his 8-year-old friend Nicky Silvers.

WHENEVER JOSH is about to play in a tournament, I'm haunted by the possibility that he isn't any good, that his supposed talent is a house of cards manufactured by his chess teacher and by a father who thrives on fantasy. I bring a book or The Sunday Times to read while he plays his games. Hours pass with the paper on my knee, but I haven't read a paragraph. I'm preoccupied with his game. The last time I looked he was down a pawn. Did he take back? Is he concentrating? Has he had too little to eat? Too much Coca-Cola? The other parents also pretend to read the Sunday paper while they worry. The kids sit monkishly in front of their chessboards, a roomful of miniature Erasmuses assiduously inscribing moves on score sheets. When the games end, they offer their hands in congratulation like courtly gentlemen. But for the parents, the tension is often too great and the veneer of nonchalance breaks like dry straw. Mothers and fathers wring their hands, feel nauseated and shake. Veins in their foreheads pulse with tension. Sometimes they snap at one another or at the tournament director.

In the final round of the 1984 New York City Primary Championship, my son played against a boy also named Josh. There was a group of 15 or 20 parents and children crowded around this game which would decide the city championship for little kids. I was too nervous to watch and stood in the stairwell of the Manhattan Chess Club with a couple of mothers who were nursing babies. Someone asked me why I wasn't watching. "I don't want to make him nervous," I lied. "The position is dead even," someone called hastily from the door. "Josh is using too much time." Which Josh?

At one point I caught the eye of the other Joshua's father, an intelligent, gentle man, and we nodded at each other a little sadly: that it had come down to this. We were both rooting like crazy for an 8-year-old kid named Josh to crack under the tension and make a heart-breaking blunder. This father had been a star running back in college, and it occurred to me that he had probably never felt more pressure on the football field than right now — all of those bone-crunching games toughening him up for afternoons like these, watching his son trying to outthink another kid.

"Josh is running out of time," someone whispered loudly. "Josh is crying," a boy said. Which Josh?

Finally, I couldn't bear the stairwell and went outside to walk around the block. All that waiting and worrying is much harder than playing. When I came back 20 minutes later, it was all over. The awards ceremony was finished and my Josh was joking and playing speed chess with another boy. They were having a good time — in between moves, making plans to get together. The tournament was old news. Josh caught my eye and lifted up the big first-place trophy. I made a gaudy high-five from across the room and smiled like Arnold Schwarzenegger when they named him Mr. Universe. Josh was a little embarrassed, but it was impossible for me to be casual. At such a moment, a parent is truly the child, giddy and dancing like a fool with fantasies of glory and immortality that he will carry to the grave. ■